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Immersing Healthcare Students in the Patient Experience can Improve Diabetes Attitudes and Increase Empathy

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Jana Wardian¹, Janelle Reynolds¹, Leah Stade¹, and Tessa Wells¹

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Audience Choice Award Honorable Mention

Abstract

Healthcare providers are encountering increasing prevalence of diabetes and disparate population burden, which may affect patient care. Provider empathy, biases, and attitudes can influence patient care and interaction. Utilizing virtual reality (VR) has positive effects on empathy and improves attitudes associated with diabetes. Our purpose was to determine if immersive cine-VR would improve diabetes attitudes and increase empathy among three healthcare student disciplines. Fifty-eight Physician Assistant (PA), 63 Physical Therapy (PT) and 21 Occupational Therapy (OT) students completed a baseline and post assessment (including Presence Questionnaire) including the Diabetes Attitude Scale (DAS-3) and the Jefferson Empathy Scale (JES). Students viewed twelve cinematic 360-degree VR modules designed to educate about diabetes and social determinants of health (SDOH). After completion, students joined live debriefing sessions with faculty facilitators. Baseline and post assessment data were matched using student identifiers. Paired t-tests were conducted to determine differences in scale and subscales from baseline to post. Data analysis demonstrated four of five DAS-3 subscales and empathy from the JES significantly increased, and high scores on the presence questionnaire, indicating positive response to the technology. Cine-VR simulations provided a unique opportunity to immerse students in a patient's life from multiple perspectives. Previous experiences instructing students about SDOH consisted of case studies presented by lecture, reading, or in-person stories. Student cohorts experienced meaning in this simulation beyond reading about patient experiences. It is our intent to further incorporate these three disciplines in future live discussions of this patient, to further break down health barriers and promote teamwork.

The project featured in this abstract has been subsequently published:

Wardian, J. L., Wells, T. M., & Cochran, T. M. (2023). Creating patient context: Empathy and attitudes toward diabetes following virtual immersion. *Journal of Diabetes Science and Technology*, 17(5) 1172–1180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19322968231174441>

Reynolds, J. G., Hyde, M. J., Beverly, E., & Wardian, J. L. (2023). Physician assistant student attitudes and empathy following virtual immersion. *Journal of allied health*, 52(3), 123E-126E.

¹University of Nebraska Medical Center

Corresponding Author: Jana Wardian
Email: jana.wardian@unmc.edu